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SUBJECT: SYRIA: 2008 COUNTRY REPORT ON TERRORISM

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[1](#)B. STATE 120019

[1](#)1. (SBU) Russell Comeau is the Embassy POC. Address: 6110 Damascus Place, Dulles, VA 20189. Unclassified e-mail: ComeauR@State.gov. Tel: (963) 11-3391-3785.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Designated in 1979 as a State Sponsor of Terrorism, Syria in 2008 continued political support to Palestinian terrorist groups. It also provided political and material support to Hizballah and allowed Iran to resupply this organization with weapons. Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PLFP), and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), among others, base their external leadership in Damascus and operate within Syria's borders. The Syrian government insists the Damascus-based groups are confined to political and informational activities, but groups with leaders in Syria have claimed responsibility for anti-Israeli terrorist attacks.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Over the course of the year, Syria's public support for the Palestinian groups varied, depending on Syrian national interest and international pressure. President Bashar al-Asad continued to express public support for Palestinian rejectionist groups. Hamas Politburo head and defacto leader Khalid Mesh'al and his deputies continued to reside in Syria. Syria provided a safehaven for Mesh'al and security escorts for his motorcades. Mesh'al's use of the Syrian Ministry of Information as the venue for press conferences this year can be taken as an endorsement of Hamas's message. Media reports indicate Hamas used Syrian soil as training grounds for its militant fighters. Though the Syrian government claimed periodically that it used its influence to restrain the rhetoric and activities of Palestinian groups, the Syrian government allowed a Palestinian rejectionist conference organized by Hamas, PFLP-GC, and PIJ to occur in January and another Hamas organized conference, reportedly funded by Iran, to occur in November.

[1](#)4. (SBU) Highlighting Syria's ties to the world's most notorious terrorists, Hizballah Operations Chief Imad Mugniyah perished in a car bomb that exploded near Syrian Military Intelligence (SMI) headquarters in the Damascus neighborhood of Kafr Sousa on February 12. Among other atrocities, Mugniyah was wanted in connection with the 1983 bombings of the Marine barracks and U.S. Embassy in Beirut, which killed over 350. Despite initial attempts to cover up the incident, the Syrian government reluctantly acknowledged some days later that one of the world's most wanted terrorists had been present and died on Syrian soil.

[1](#)5. (SBU) Syrian officials publicly condemned some acts of

terrorism, while continuing to defend what they considered to be legitimate armed resistance by Palestinians and Hizballah against Israeli occupation of Arab territory, and by the Iraqi opposition against the "occupation of Iraq." Syria has not been directly implicated in an act of terrorism since 1986, although an ongoing UN investigation into the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri continued to investigate Syrian involvement.

¶6. (SBU) Syria itself was the location of at least one major attack involving a terrorist group with which it had or used to have ties. On September 27, the car-bombing of a Syrian government facility reportedly injured 14 and killed at least 17 individuals, marking the first significant attack against regime institutions in nearly 20 years. Not since the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in the early 1980s have Syrian institutions been targeted by terrorists. Regional media reports indicated this bombing was directed at the Palestinian Branch of the Syrian Military Intelligence.

¶7. (SBU) Throughout the year Syria continued to strengthen ties with fellow state sponsor of terrorism, Iran. Syria's Minister of Defense visited Tehran in May and initiated a defense cooperation Memorandum of Understanding. Syria also allowed leaders of Hamas and other Palestinian groups to visit Tehran. President Asad repaid a 2007 visit to Damascus by Iranian President Ahmadinejad with a visit of his own to Tehran in early August, his third visit since 2005. Asad continued to be a staunch defender of Iran's policies, including Iran's "civil" nuclear ambitions.

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¶8. (SBU) Syria increased border monitoring activities, instituted tighter screening practices on military-age Arab males entering its borders, hosted two Border Security Working Group meetings with technical experts from the Iraqi Neighbors group and expressed a desire to increase security cooperation with Iraq. At the same time, Syria remained a key hub for foreign fighters en route to Iraq. The Syrian government continued to harbor former Iraqi regime elements.

¶9. (SBU) The U.S. Government designated several Iraqis and Iraqi-owned entities residing in Syria which provided financial, material, and technical support for acts of violence that threatened the peace and stability of Iraq, including Mish'an Al-Jaburi and his satellite television channel Al-Ra'y. Additionally, the U.S. Government designated known foreign fighter facilitators based in Syria, including members of the Abu Ghadiyah network, which orchestrated the flow of terrorists, weapons, and money from Syria to al-Qaida in Iraq. Attacks against Coalition Forces and Iraqi citizens continued to have a destabilizing effect on Iraq's internal security. Though Syrian and Iraqi leaders met throughout the year both publicly and privately to discuss border enhancements and other measures needed to combat foreign fighter flows, there have been few tangible results.

¶10. (SBU) Despite acknowledged reductions in foreign fighter flows, the scope and impact of the problem remained significant. Syria continued to allow former Iraqi regime elements to operate in the country. According to the December 2007 "Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq" report to Congress, nearly 90% of all foreign terrorists known in Iraq used Syria as an entry point, and there is no evidence to suggest that this percentage has diminished over the past year. While Syria has taken some positive steps, the Syrian government can do more to interdict known terrorist networks and foreign fighter facilitators operating within its borders. Syria's ability to turn the flow of fighters off and on for political reasons was apparent in the wake of the alleged October 26 military incursion into Syria, when the Syrian government's self-described response was to remove border guards from key border checkpoints along the Iraqi/Syrian border.

¶11. (SBU) Syria remains a source of concern regarding terrorist financing. The Commercial Bank of Syria remains subject to U.S. sanctions. Industry experts report that 70 percent of all business transactions are conducted in cash and that nearly 90 percent of all Syrians do not use formal banking services. Despite SARG legislation requiring money-changers to be licensed by the end of 2007, many money-changers continued to operate illegally in Syria's vast black market, estimated to be as large as Syria's formal economy. Regional "hawala" networks remain intertwined with smuggling and trade-based money laundering - facilitated by notoriously corrupt customs and immigration officials - raising significant concerns that Syrian government and business elite are, at the very least, complicit in terror financing schemes.

¶12. (SBU) Syria's government-controlled press continued to tout Syrian regime efforts to combat terrorism. The Syrian government, using tightly-controlled press outlets, was quick to blame a Lebanese-based, al-Qaida affiliated group, Fatah al-Islam, for this attack. Syrian TV broadcast a November 7 program featuring the confessions of some 20 Fatah al-Islam members, including the daughter and son-in-law of Fatah al-Islam leader Shakr al-Absy, of their involvement in the attack against the prominent military intelligence installation. Syrian and other commentators have noted that the Syrian government allegedly had maintained ties to Shakr al-Absy, for whom Jordanian authorities had issued an arrest warrant for the 2003 murder of USAID employee Lawrence Foley. Fatah al-Islam was also involved in the 2007 standoff against the Lebanese Armed Forces in the Nahr al Barid camp located in northern Lebanon. It remains unclear why this group would have launched an attack against Syrian security elements, but media reports suggest Absy's disappearance inside of Syria as a possible motive. In response to the September 27 bombing, the Syrian security services conducted at least one reported raid on a terror cell residing in the Damascus area, killing and arresting several suspected militants and confiscating a cache of weapons and explosives. Since the attack, the regime has attempted to portray Syria as a victim of terrorism rather than a purveyor of it.

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